

Lewis & Clark in North Dakota

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



1804-05: *Corps of Discovery* Aided by Mandan & Hidatsa Nations



In October of 1804, the westbound Lewis and Clark expedition, also known as the *Corps of Discovery*, was making its way up the Missouri River when it reached the earthlodge villages of the Mandan and Hidatsa tribes. Their hospitality allowed the *Corps* to construct Fort Mandan across the river as a winter refuge. Images: by Ralph W. Smith, courtesy of State Historical Society of ND, 11549 and 11550.

Native American homelands in North Dakota crossed by the *Corps of Discovery* belonged to: the Hunkpapa and Yankton bands of the Sioux tribe, and the Arikara, Mandan, Hidatsa, and Assiniboine tribes.

Between St. Louis and the Pacific Ocean, the Lewis and Clark expedition passed through dozens of Native American tribal lands whose settlement of the northern plains dates back almost 10,000 years.

That the expedition traversed the continent without harm from the inhabitants was largely due to a chain of events which began on Mandan and Hidatsa lands. Numbering 4,500 people in five permanent villages near the mouth of the Knife River, they assisted the *Corps* during its 146-day stay through the winter of 1804-05. Friendly and generous, they supplemented the *Corps*' provisions and offered information about the territory ahead.

The *Corps*' good fortune was compounded when they hired a French trapper living among the Hidatsa. His young wife, Sacagawea, accompanied the *Corps* with her infant son. A Lemhi Shoshone believed to have been captured at a young age and subsequently traded to the Hidatsa, her presence signaled to other tribes that the expedition, although armed, was not at war.

Her skills were many: she was familiar with the Hidatsa and Shoshone languages, knew which plants were edible, and recognized landmarks. But Sacagawea's most important contribution was the result of a remarkable event: when they reached a Shoshone village she recognized their chief, Cameahwait, as her brother! This incredible reunion resulted in the *Corps* obtaining Shoshone horses for crossing the Rocky Mountains.

Had Lewis and Clark not spent the winter of 1804-05 among the Mandan and Hidatsas, the outcome of the expedition might have been quite different.

Life after the Lewis and Clark expedition: Several factors began to undermine the very existence of Native Americans. Commerce in fur grew along the upper Missouri, and some traders ignored a federal law prohibiting the use of alcohol in trade; or they used unfair business practices, all of which took a long-lasting toll on many tribes.

Smallpox arrived with the Europeans, and the tribes had no immunity to the disease. The worst epidemic occurred in 1837, when the Mandan population was reduced by 90 percent, and the Hidatsa by half. In 1845, they left their Knife River villages and moved upriver. A similar fate led the nearby Arikara tribe to unite with the Mandan and Hidatsa as the Three Affiliated Tribes.

In 1851, the Fort Laramie Treaty established over 12 million acres as territorial lands for the Three Tribes. After tribal leaders refused the US Government's attempt to relocate them to lands in Oklahoma in the 1870's, a series of allotment acts in the 1890's reduced the Ft. Berthold reservation to less than 3 million acres. During this time, residents were forced to adopt Christianity and send their children to boarding schools. Across North Dakota, military forts were built to protect the expansion of Euro-American settlement and railroad construction.

In 1946, the Three Tribes were dealt another blow: Construction began on the Garrison Dam, which flooded their prime bottom lands, leaving the Ft. Berthold reservation with only 1 million acres above water... *In just over a century, the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara had little left to call their own ...*

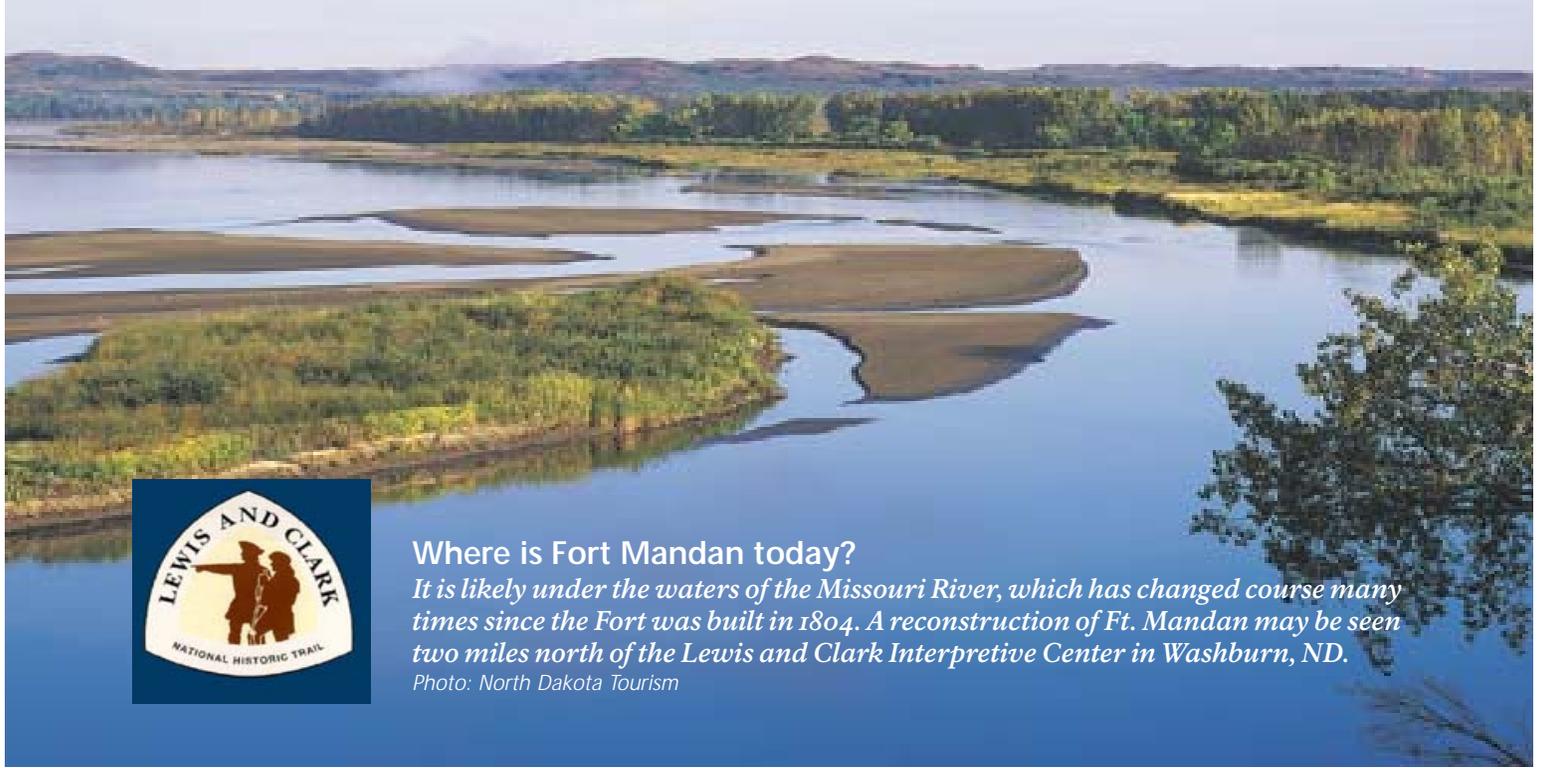
Today, their descendants strive to keep tribal culture and traditions alive for all to appreciate.



Sacagawea statue in Bismarck, ND. This young Shoshone-Hidatsa woman was invaluable to Lewis and Clark as ambassador and interpreter.



NPS photo



Where is Fort Mandan today?

It is likely under the waters of the Missouri River, which has changed course many times since the Fort was built in 1804. A reconstruction of Ft. Mandan may be seen two miles north of the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center in Washburn, ND.

Photo: North Dakota Tourism

Chronology of the Corps in North Dakota: The expedition followed the Missouri River through North Dakota twice. In 1804-05 it was headed west to the Pacific Ocean; in 1806, the Corps was eastbound on its return home.

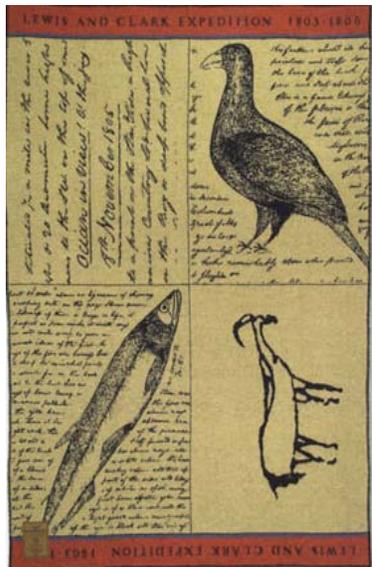


Image: "Journal Pages" courtesy of Faribault Woolen Mills, Minnesota.

One of President Jefferson's many objectives for Lewis and Clark was to record and collect plant and animal specimens "not known in the United States," which at the time was territory east of the Mississippi. They described 122 animal species, and collected more than 200 plant specimens. After the winter at Ft. Mandan, the Captains sent a shipment to the President containing maps, journals, plant and mineral specimens, animal skins, bones, and cages with four live magpies and a prairie dog!

October 14, 1804 Expedition struggles upstream on Missouri River into present-day North Dakota. On **Oct. 24th** it encounters Mandan and Hidatsa villages near today's Stanton, ND at mouth of Knife River. Native Americans are gracious hosts; Corps builds Ft. Mandan across the river to overwinter.

November 4, 1804 Corps hires Toussaint Charbonneau, a French-Canadian fur trapper living with Hidatsas, as an interpreter. His wife, Sacagawea, proves invaluable during next two years as a translator and ambassador. **Nov. 6th** Lewis's journal mentions their observation of celestial phenomenon, the Northern Lights.

December 24, 1804 Ft. Mandan is finished, Corps moves in. They endure a brutal winter, temperatures as low as -40F. On **Feb. 11th**, Sacagawea gives birth to a boy, Jean Baptiste.

April 7, 1805 River is free of ice and Captains Lewis and Clark send the keelboat and 12 men back east with maps and scientific specimens for President Jefferson. Corps party now totals 33 people; they continue west in 6 dugout canoes and 2 pirogues. Until now, they had been in country early traders had described, but now they were entering territory that was a 'great unknown' to Europeans.

April 27, 1805 Lewis's journal describes a place near the confluence of the Yellowstone

and Missouri rivers that later (in 1829) becomes Fort Union Trading Post. Corps soon enters present-day Montana, headed for the Pacific Ocean.

August 7-8, 1806 Lewis and Clark each re-enter present-day North Dakota separately. **Aug. 11th** Lewis is accidentally shot by a crew member while exploring, receiving a superficial wound in the buttocks. Having split the party in early July to explore different territory, they reunite on **Aug. 12th** near modern day New Town, ND-now a center of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara people, also known as the Three Affiliated Tribes.

August 14, 1806 The Corps arrives at the Mandan and Hidatsa Knife River villages to return Charbonneau, Sacagawea, and young Jean Baptiste to their home. During this brief reunion among the people who had given refuge in the winter of 1804-05, Lewis and Clark convince the Mandan Chief Shekeke and his family to accompany them in order to meet President Jefferson.

August 17, 1806 Lewis and Clark pay Charbonneau, bid farewell to Sacagawea, and leave the Knife River villages. Floating quickly downstream (up to 80 miles a day), by **Aug. 20th** the Corps crosses what is now the state line between North Dakota and South Dakota. They arrive in St. Louis **Sept. 23rd**.

Image: "Lewis and Clark at Black Cat's Village," by Andy Knutson, 2006. Courtesy of the State Historical Society of North Dakota, who commissioned the artist to depict Lewis and Clark's return to the Knife River villages August 14 - 17, 1806.

